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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the future of education in relation to school trustees' responsibilities for public decision-making. Trustees should maximize local decision-making as the preferred alternative, the paper says, to try to avoid a depersonalized, highly bureaucratized, future society. Several authors' views of social and educational futures are cited. (Author/LD)

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The Future- Its Challenge and Implications for Public Decision Making

DESMOND E. BERGHOFER
Assistant Deputy Minister
Alberta Advancd Education and Education

Occasional Paper No. 5

Department of Secondary Education
Faculty of Education The University of Alberta

CURRICULUM, MEDIA & INSTRUCTION

EA 012 383

To Our Reader:

This paper is part of the Department of Secondary Education's CMI Publication Series. It is an occasional paper, and as such we invite you to focus on a dimension of the field of CURRICULUM, MEDIA AND INSTRUCTION. It is also an informal paper and as such it is meant to allow the author to bring to the reader thoughts at some moment of development, from an early exploratory moment to a later more refined moment.

The series hopefully will consist of papers "occasionally" printed as relevant papers come our way. We see them as conversation pieces - "thought-works" that might engage readers and, possibly on occasions author and reader, to come together in a face-to-face "talk-talk".

Thus, we recognize the papers as being essentially incomplete, rooted in the idea that collaborations cannot be exhausted by an actual paper nor any actual reader. We ask you, our reader to collaborate by using the papers to grasp the reason for the essential incompleteness, that is, we ask you to grasp the conception of analysis which makes the papers possible. We ask you this because we feel that these papers themselves, although they have to be used to make the point, are never the point.

The point is, as far as we are concerned, in collaborative dialogue.

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THE FUTURE - ITS CHALLENGE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC DECISION MAKING

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Alberta Advanced Education and Manpower

When I was asked by your Conference Organizing Committee to speak to you this afternoon, I was happy to accept for a number of reasons. In the first place, I was pleased to see interest in tying the concept of decision making to some idea about alternative futures. This has been a kind of hobbyhorse with me for a number of years and one is always pleased to see others agreeing with one's point of view. Whether such agreement will continue throughout the afternoon remains to be seen.

My interest in the future and its relationship to educational decision making goes back to the period 1970-72, when I was engaged in Doctoral research at the University of Alberta. I had stumbled somewhat by accident, into the growing body of literature about the future and its potential implications. I became intrigued with the idea of seeing whether such ideas would have any impact on the way educators make decisions about policy. In the small study that I undertook, I found that it did. I found that people who are exposed to a breadth of ideas about the future do tend to think more comprehensively and put forward more alternatives to the current way of doing things than do those who have not had this exposure to ideas about the future. Basically, the educators who had thought carefully about the future tended to take more into account when they were making decisions. In a complex society like ours where everything seems to be related to everything else, I believe that such a broad approach to decision making is essential.

A second reason why I was pleased to accept the offer to speak about the subject was that it gave me an opportunity to reflect in more detail on this kind of material than I am normally able to do in my capacity as a government administrator. The outcome of this reflection is what I plan to share with you this afternoon.

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* In granting permission to print his paper, Dr. Berghofer mentioned that "this paper was prepared specifically for the Banff Alberta School Trustees' seminar in response to a request from the organizers of the seminar for a paper that would lead school trustees to think about the future in relation to the responsibility for decision-making and what should or should not be included in collective agreements. . . . What I say in my paper is that trustees should maximize local decision-making as the preferred alternative to try to avoid a depersonalized, highly bureaucratized future society. . . .

From a Curriculum and Instruction perspective I believe that the future's literature has much to say about what the content and format of education might be given a variety of different scenarios."

This paper was presented in June 1977.

A third reason why I was pleased to accept this engagement was that it gave me a chance once again to touch base with the Alberta school system. I have been immersed during the last few years in the post-secondary aspect of education in Alberta, and it's always pleasing to have the opportunity to meet directly with those involved with basic education.

Basically, I intend to do four things in this presentation:

1. First, I want to say something about why I believe that systematic thinking about the future is important.

2. Secondly, I would like to share with you some of what I believe to be the more powerful ideas about the future that have been produced in the last decade or so.

3. Thirdly, and this is where it becomes tough, I would like to try to tease out the things that seem to be most certain about the future.

4. Finally, and I would hope that we can do this part of the exercise together, I would like to try to see the implications of all of this for you people as trustees of education in this province.

Why This Interest in the Future

Let me begin, then, with the question of why the future should be of particular interest to all of us who, by historical accident, happen to be alive in the latter part of the twentieth century. I believe the future is important to us in a way that it was not significant to earlier generations, because, to put it bluntly, the future is not what it used to be. The world is riding on the back of a tiger who is carrying all of us, old and young alike, into unfamiliar territory. The tiger is called change, his source of energy is technology, and the country across which he roams is that stony land, that rocky terrain, between the present and the future.

We are just beginning to realize that the ride is rough. While the way ahead remains, as it always was, perpetually shrouded in mist, the speed of our tiger, and the different directions he takes us day by day make us less sure of what to expect behind the mist, and less certain that we can cope with whatever is there.

Faced with this basic uncertainty about what lies ahead, we are increasingly paying more attention to the future; not so much out of idle curiosity, but rather as a means to better manage human affairs. We are, in short, beginning to realize that under conditions of rapid change the future becomes a legitimate field of inquiry.

In trying to think about the future, a couple of things are important. Firstly, we have to understand that the future doesn't exist. It is simply in our heads. It's something we can't quite get our hands on. More important, however, is the idea that the future is not pre-determined. It's not a single thing, but rather a whole array of possibilities, any one of which is likely to happen.

So we can talk then about alternative futures, and it follows that man, by his conscious choices, can affect how the future actually occurs. That is, the future is influenced by human choices in the present. From this point of view we will get the future we deserve, because we have had the opportunity to influence it.

Another reason why the future is important to people involved in public decision making, is that public decisions are very strongly affected by environmental conditions - and I talk here about environment in a total sense - social, political, economic, and physical. The decision maker who misreads the environment in which he is working is likely to have a lot of problems. The future environment is rather uncertain, hence it behooves us to expend some energy on trying to increase its certainty.

Some Views of the Social Future

So much, then, for why the future is important. I would like to turn now to outlining some of what I believe to be the more significant ideas about the future, and I'm talking here about the future of western type societies. About fifteen years ago, Fred Polak[1], a Dutch sociologist, wrote a book called The Image of the Future. In this work, Polak argued that the great problem of western civilization is that it has lost the capacity to think positively about the future. Polak argues that in general we no longer believe that we can have a "good future"; neither do we particularly believe in a divine intervention that can help us out. Thus, we have lost two of the strongest beliefs that earlier generations had. We are so caught up in the complicated present that we are losing our sixth sense for that something beyond and better than the present - that something that can pull us forward with confidence. Thus, Polak argues, we need to become seriously engaged in generating new visions of the possible; new dreams, if you like, to whip up enthusiasm and awaken our minds.

Another writer who has spent a long life commenting on the future and the direction that western society is going in, is Lewis Mumford[2]. In his book The Pentagon of Power, published in 1970, he argues that modern man is now in trouble because he has taken a mechanistic view of things. This tradition goes back several hundred years to people like Galileo and Francis Bacon. What has happened, according to Mumford, is that over the last few centuries science and technology have become wedded to power and productivity. Nowadays, the idea of progress is

associated with ideas of more and further and man is forced to consume and waste and devote his life to the continued operation of the great machine-like world in which he finds himself. In return for this dedication, man receives the benefits of material comforts but pays the cost of a deteriorating physical and psychological environment. The solution? Mumford argues that we've got to snap out of it. We've got to undergo something akin to a spontaneous religious conversion, to replace the mechanical view of the world with an organic world picture in which humanism is stressed and human relations are given precedence over veneration of machines and gadgets and material objects.

Another writer about the future who achieved widespread popularity in North America some years ago is Alvin Toffler[3]. In his runaway best seller, Future Shock, published in 1971, Toffler asserted that we can look forward to a complex, tumultuous future in which the convergence of three factors - transience, novelty, and diversity - sets the stage for what he calls a historic crisis of adaptation. By transience, he meant our tendency to throw things away and not only things, but places and people as well. By novelty, he meant the ability to explore and experiment with new freedoms, freedom to do almost anything we want - perhaps even create life. By diversity, he meant the overwhelming variety of goods and life styles and sub-cults, among which we have to choose.

Toffler asserts that what all of this adds up to is an undesirable situation in which great masses of mankind face the possibility of being submitted to demands that they simply cannot tolerate. We run the risk of throwing them into that condition which Toffler has called "future shock".

Toffler then goes on to suggest that what we have to do is to help people be able to adapt to this coming tumultuous state of affairs. Speaking about education specifically, he asserts that the prime objective of education must be to increase the individual's "cope-ability", that is, the speed and economy with which the individual can adapt to continual change. Toffler has little regard for the current educational system which he views as a hopeless anachronism "cranking out industrial man". He questions the validity of such organisational factors as compulsory education, the isolation of children in schools, the emphasis on youth, the exclusive rights of teachers to teach, and rigid systems of scheduling and grouping. On the subject of values, he believes that the good school should help the student to define, explicate and test his values, whatever they are. To focus schools on the future, he suggests the establishment of a Council of the Future in each school.

By the time he gets to the last point, Toffler has somewhat shifted his position and instead of arguing strongly that what needs to be done is to help people adapt, he begins to argue that it is necessary to institute mechanisms to prevent the undesirable state of affairs from happening in the first place. Thus, he has come to the same conclusion as Polak and Mumford. He speaks about a strategy called "social futurism"

and looks to the development of "social indicators". In the final instance, he links futurism to the political process and suggests the convening in nations, cities, and neighborhoods of "democratic constituent assemblies" charged with social stock taking. Such "social future assemblies" would bring people back into political life and confront them directly with the profound ethical issues that the future raises.

The writers reviewed so far are sociologists. When we turn to what biologists and earth scientists have to say about the future, then the issues come into even sharper perspective. People like Donald Chant[4], Barry Commoner[5], and S. R. Eyre[6] have drawn attention to the effects that man's behavior is having on the ecological system to the world and on the depletion of natural resources. They argue for the need for mankind to adjust its whole way of life before the pressures on these natural systems are such that irreversible breakdowns occur.

Perhaps the most dramatic picturing of the future has been done by people working in the relatively new profession of social dynamics, and I speak specifically of Jay Forrester[7] and Donald Meadows[8]. Their approach to picturing the future was to create a mathematic model of the world as a system and to program this on a computer so that a variety of projections could be displayed depending upon what variables are manipulated within the model. I don't propose to go into the technical details of this approach to examining the future, but suffice it to say that the only way such an approach could display a "desirable future condition" was by making some drastic changes to current patterns of resource consumption. Specifically, drastic reductions were required in the natural-resource-usage rate, reduction in polution generation, in capital-investment generation, in food production, and in birth rate. These changes would mean an end to population growth and a levelling off of standard of living, as we now define it. They suggest a reversal of the emphasis on economic development. Would such changes be acceptable, and are they in fact implementable this side of catastrophe?

What, in fact, can we conclude from all these analyses of the future? Are we on a collision course with disaster? Has mankind, like the sorcerer's apprentice set in motion an uncontrollable force which has given short-range benefit, but promises long-range destruction? Is it impossible for an advanced technological society to persist indefinitely in a closed ecological system?

The analyses don't answer those questions for us, but they do sketch in a background against which decisions can be made. They ought, at the very least, to encourage us to ask ourselves, as public decision makers, whether or not our decision making is taking us towards one of these undesirable future states. What kind of a future are we, through our public responsibilities, shaping for society?

Educational Futures

So far, the analyses referred to have been descriptions of social futures. A more important question for this particular audience is "Where does education fit in?" Let me deal briefly with what a couple of writers have had to say about that, and then we shall, I hope, come back to this question together at the end.

Faced with these analyses of the social future, education is clearly in a dilemma. The kind of educational system we have today is contributing to the kind of social future we shall have tomorrow. At the same time, the educational system is imbedded in the current social fabric. Is it reasonable, therefore, to expect much dramatic change on society to be effected through the educational system? Some writers are very pessimistic about this. Toffler, as I have already mentioned, had some positive ideas about what could be done, but others like Donald Michael[9] feel that the best that we can hope for is the education of an elite group who will have the wisdom to get the rest of us through the tough times ahead. Another educational critic, Ivan Illich[10], has argued that what is needed is radical surgery, in that society needs to be "deschooled".

Illich's analysis is interesting. He would replace what he calls the present approach of education as a kind of a funnel for teaching packages, with a network or web for the learner to put together his own learning resources. He argues that we should replace the present teacher-curriculum dominated model with an approach in which the learner himself seeks out references, people, and experiences that will enable him to learn at his own rate and in his own way. In the end, Illich comes back to the same point that Polack and Mumford and Toffler argued for, namely, the emergence of a new kind of human individual, who would place more emphasis on people than on products, who would love the earth on which he lives, and would respect the rights of all other species on that earth.

Closer to home, we had in Alberta, in 1972, a published report called A Choice of Futures, more commonly known as the "Worth Report".[11] This, you will recall, comprised the work of the Commission on Education Planning, which has been asked to chart the course for education in this province for the remainder of this century. This report began by discussing the concept of alternative futures and in its first chapter posed a choice for Alberta citizens between what it called "a second-phase industrial society" and "a person-centered society".

Perhaps it was not so much a choice between the two types of society, but rather a choice between pursuing one or the other kind. The second-phase industrial society would be basically an extension of the present with emphasis on material goods, consumption, and preoccupation with technological development. The second choice, the person-centered society, assumes a significant break with past trends. It implies a shift in values towards a belief that the needs and rights of people take precedence.

The overarching goal would be the cultivation and enrichment of all human beings.

Worth argues that there is mounting evidence that traditional values are not serving us well. Economic disparities, inequality of opportunity, employment, crime, serious threats to the environment, social unrest, alienation, powerlessness of the individual and loss of sense of community are already facts of life. Thus, he argues that it is undesirable to pursue those traditional values toward the realization of the second-phase industrial society, and that what is required is to break with the traditional and to pursue a person-centered society. Worth saw the function of the future educational system as being to enable Albertans to make the choice between the two alternative futures.

Developments Since 1972

All of the material to which I have referred was a matter of public record by 1972, which, as I said at the outset, was the time when I personally was working most directly with this kind of analysis. However, it is now 1977 and some of that future that we were talking about in 1972 has already come and gone. In preparing to speak to you today, I, therefore, thought it incumbent to reflect on the past five years to see what light they had to shed on what we were talking about back in those earlier days.

Do you recall 1972? When an average house in urban Alberta could be purchased for $25,000 to $30,000; a gallon of gasoline went for about 45¢; and a cup of coffee could still be bought for 10¢. When the Energy Conservation Board was telling us that we had enough oil and gas to last Canada for hundreds of years.

I don't particularly want to dwell at length on the differences between 1977 and 1972, but the ones I have mentioned certainly don't refute the forecasts of difficult times to come that I have already alluded to. More significantly for me, however, have been three particular experiences which I would like to share with you. The first had to do with my involvement in a national project in which a researcher from Environment Canada engaged a wide variety of people across the country in what she called "conversations about the future". The outcome of that project has now been published in a rather discursive document[12], but which suggests the following as major findings. The year she is talking about is 1975.

1. The social context in which Canadians find themselves is one of disintegration and change.

2. There is a growing consensus that the dominant social ethos of the industrial era is no longer tenable - that we cannot go on the way we are. There is a need for Canadians to discover common ground on which to base survival and nurture

well-being. The dominant values imbedded in our social structure and institutions are the creations of the industrial era, and they are coming to be seen by growing numbers of Canadians as no longer wholly tenable, and as damaging to human well-being and as constraining the possibility of achieving human potential.

3. Fundamental impediments to achieving a viable future are pessimism and the experiencing of powerlessness and impotence - conditions of the mind; both these conditions exist in Canada today but there also exists hope and a sense of opportunities to be seized.

From those general findings, the researcher deduced a number of principles, namely:

1. Change will come about through a continuing and dynamic process in which the purposes and actions of institutions are more firmly rooted in human needs, including the non-material as well as the material.

2. In this process, attention must be given to developing new concepts of decision making, planning, efficiency, evaluation so that the health and survival of persons take precedence over the health and survival of institutions.

3. This process will involve the trial of alternative kinds of decision-making and planning, rather than concerted efforts to draw up and follow some "master plan" based on conformity.

4. Technologies that are neither destructive of nature nor oppressive of people must have precedence over other technologies.

From the above summary, there is obvious consistency between this national report and that developed by Worth three years earlier for Alberta.

Even more recently, another Federal report entitled The Selective Conserver Society[13] was published (July 1976). I had the opportunity last year to discuss this project with the principal researchers, Dr. Kimon Valaskakis and Peter Sindell. They had been asked to address the question of whether uncontrolled, undirected industrial growth was a desirable option for Canada in the 1970's and 1980's. There were two major results of this study. The first identified that it was not necessary to limit growth per se but rather to limit what they called "forward throughput", that is the process of converting natural resources into manufactured products. The second major result was to challenge the assumed close relationship between consumerism and "happiness".

The proposed policy option that this project offers for consideration

to the Canadian public is a "selective conserver society". Such a society would strive to (a) conserve inputs and outputs by reducing waste wherever and whenever it is encountered; (b) develop in increasing harmony with nature rather than in opposition to it; (c) measure the long term consequences of its actions before undertaking them.

A final event which I would like to refer to and use as a focus for bringing much of this material together, occurred in 1975. This was the convening of the first of a series of international conferences to be held every two years for the next ten years on the "Limits to Growth". At this meeting, researchers, politicians, government officials, academics, industrialists, and so on from various parts of the world met to consider the basic questions which had been raised particularly by the work of Forrester and Meadows to which I referred earlier.

The Conference represented a widespread range of opinion about the subject. There were those who felt that this talk of limits was basically nonsense and that what was needed was confidence and determination to press on with the way we've been doing things and that in so doing, solutions to problems would be found, as they always have been found in the past. That was the extreme view on the one hand, and on the other, the extreme view was that we need immediately to make drastic cuts in our consumptive behavior. Needless to say, these issues were not resolved at the conference, but for me personally, some insights were reached concerning a reasonable way for us to proceed. These insights came mainly from the remarks of one of the participants in the conference who, I felt, was taking a responsible, realistic, and undramatic approach to dealing with a very complex subject. I refer to Ernst Schumacher[14], an economist, but an economist of a different stamp from the traditional people who wear that label.

Schumacher's conclusion with respect to the economic world condition is that for the past thirty years we, in the developed world have been guests at a rather lavish party; but now the party is over. From 1925 to 1975 has been a period of quite unheard of and totally exceptional development in the world. During this period, we have been operating under three great illusions. Firstly, that against all laws of nature, we have acted as though we believe infinite growth was possible in a finite environment. Secondly, we have seemed to believe that there would always be an unlimited supply of people prepared to do mindless, repetitive work for quite modest remuneration, and who will not kick against it. We have only to look at the labour movement throughout the world and pretty close to home to realize how much of an illusion that has been. Thirdly, we have believed, and still seem to believe, that science can solve all problems. Schumacher argues that in his experience, as science solves a problem it creates a host of new ones. We now have this magnificient scientific community in the world busily solving, but at the same time generating, new problems. Schumacher has likened these individuals, together with his fellow economists, to deck

hands, who, instead of attending to the life boats, are busily rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

Schumacher's conclusion, and this is a very important point to grasp, is that, in operating under those particular illusions, we have generated a form of technology characterized by many things but by one thing in particular, namely, bigger and bigger mass production units in the hands of business managers and engineers who, as very able people, are pursuing economies of scale. The tendency in such operation has been to locate these mass production units as near as possible to the market sites and to transport the raw materials and the people required to man the production units to those sites. The result has been a world-wide migration of people, which we commonly refer to as the phenomenon of "urbanization". What this really means is the agglomeration of people in a few places and the brain-drain from rural areas into big cities with the concomitant result that the bigness approach had then to be implemented in the rural community resulting in bigger farms, more and more artificial fertilizers and bigger and bigger machinery.

The work with which Schumacher is now identified is seeking to show that national economies do not of necessity have to be organized that way. He is engaged in what he calls the development of intermediate technology, which simply means the development of smaller production units located in smaller centres of population employing local people and throwing decision-making back onto local groups and recreating a sense of local community and an ability to solve problems locally. Schumacher sees this as the wave of the future. And my own personal conclusion is that Schumacher is right.

Conclusions About Choices We Have To Make

I am now at that point of my presentation where I would like to try to fold things together to see what can be teased out as a background against which public decision-making in education can be carried out. I would argue first of all that developments over the past seven years of this decade have been consistent in illustrating that there must be a change in western societies in traditional values which have been thrusting us towards what Worth called a second-phase industrial society. If we are to retain the freedom we now have, we must abandon notions of continuing to move in that direction, because the pressures on the environment, that such a direction is generating, are such that the thrust cannot be maintained without the need for us to sacrifice freedom to severe controls. We cannot have our cake and eat it too.

There is no need, however, to regard this kind of a conclusion as being necessarily bad. As many of the writers that I have reviewed have indicated, the benefits of our current system are pretty questionable when you stack them side by side with the costs. It may well be, therefore, that in the long haul, we shall be much better off, but in the short

term, of course, we're going to have problems, because we are caught in a period of transition which can result in social disruptions on an enormous scale. The situation reminds me of the ancient Chinese curse: "May you live in interesting times!" Ladies and gentlemen, we are living in interesting times and we need to latch on to some of Polak's visions of the future if we are to make it through.

Essentially, the major implication I see for all of us, as individuals, is the need to accept more responsibility for everything we do. The industrial and social system that Schumacher and Mumford have described have taught us to be a almost mindless consumers who are ignorant of the pressures that our consumptive patterns have in places removed from our own immediate situation. In our relationships with government, we have come to expect that the state will increasingly assume responsibility for much that affects us. I'm speaking here specifically of education and health care as perhaps the best two examples of this phenomena. If those two systems are to be prevented from toppling under economic pressure, then we have to back off as citizens in the kinds of demands we are making on them. We have to take more responsibility for our own education and health and not expect the state to do it for us, because it can't. That expectation is an illusion, generated from the other illusions to which Schumacher referred. My belief is that as we begin to accept more social responsibility, we will, in fact be moving towards the kind of involvement in human relations that Worth has pictured as the basis of what he called a person-centered society.

The major implication then for those who are involved in public decision making in education, is not to allow those decisions to go in a direction that would be counter to what is needed to bring us through the transition period to which I have referred. I think that this issue must be the meat of your deliberations about public decision making in education.

I am not suggesting that the state would cease to recognize its responsibility for the funding of education, for I believe that the principles of such involvement are certainly well established and should be maintained. What the state will have to do, however, is to assess carefully its role with regard to the operation of education. The indications are that the role of the state will become more and more one of coordination of local effort rather than the laying on of services. There will be increased responsibility at the local level and this carries with it a concomitant requirement for those involved in local decision making to become enlightened about the major issues.

There is also a clear implication here of the need for education to shift somewhat away from the present trend toward adopting what might be called the industrial model. This model carries with it notions of specialization and confrontation, and education is an enterprise that cannot have too much of either of those ingredients and still continue to be a service aimed at liberating the mind and encouraging human development.

Conclusion

That, ladies and gentlemen, basically concludes my presentation. I have sought this afternoon to show you why the concept of the future is important to your deliberations about decision-making education, and I have attempted to pick out some indicators of the direction that we must go in order to have the best chance of avoiding major dislocations in the future.

As I said before, I firmly believe that our society is going to be the better for it in the long haul, but in the interim, shall face some difficult problems. This will be a time when the concept of trusteeship in education is going to be given new life. If you are to be trustees in fact as well as in name of this critically important part of our social fabric, then you will be challenged over the next few years to the ultimate bounds of your wisdom and tolerance. I wish you well in that exciting enterprise. May you survive the interesting times!

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